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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2578, LEBANON: AMIN GEMAYEL SEEKS COORDINATED STRATEGY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2578	2006-08-09 08:06	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMIN GEMAYEL SEEKS COORDINATED STRATEGY
TO WEAKEN HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) In an August 8 meeting with the Ambassador and poloff, Kata'eb Party leader and former President Amin Gemayel discussed what should follow a cease=fire in the current conflict with Israel. Gemayel is frustrated that the Maronite Presidency has been sidelined during Emile Lahoud's tenure, and he hopes to expose corruption within the Lahoud family in order to force the President to leave office. He also believes that there needs to be a coordinated strategy among the Lebanese and international players to "hold Hizballah accountable" for provoking the destruction of Lebanon and to "reverse the perception" in the Arab-Muslim street that Hizballah is the victor in this conflict. Gemayel thinks that Hizballah can also be weakened through strengthening the moderate Shi'a element, including Nabih Berri's Amal party and third-way Shi'a. Gemayel said the Kata'eb is looking to form alliances with these groups. End Summary.

"WE HAVE TO BE PART OF THE KITCHEN"

¶12. (C/NF) Gemayel expressed his annoyance that President Lahoud did not attend the Cabinet session on August 7 which voted unanimously for the LAF deployment to the South. Lahoud has been left out of the game entirely during this conflict and, by his inaction, is reducing the Maronite Presidency to irrelevance. "We have to be part of the kitchen," exclaimed Gemayel, while urging that a means be found to remove Lahoud from Baabda Palace following a cease-fire. Gemayel urged that Lahoud's most vulnerable point is his son, Emile Emile, who is implicated in money-laundering and the Oil For Food scandal. If damning evidence could be found on Emile Emile, argued Gemayel, the father may be forced to step down.

¶13. (C) Gemayel claimed he does not envision a workable constitutional process for replacing Lahoud before his term ends in November 2007. While bringing Berri and his Amal bloc into the anti-Lahoud camp - "I'm sure Berri doesn't like Lahoud" - would in theory provide the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to remove a sitting President, Gemayel thinks it will be difficult to liberate Berri from Hizballah's - and, by extension, Syria's - influence in the Parliament. "Berri will play the Hizballah game for some months."

"MR. NASRALLAH, YOU DESTROYED YOUR COUNTRY"

¶14. (C) Regarding how to launch an effective challenge to Hizballah's certain intention to claim victory after a ceasefire, Gemayel argued for a two-pronged approach, coordinated in advance between the Lebanese and the international community, weakening Hizballah while strengthening other parties and Lebanese government institutions. Gemayel said that the Druze and the Christians would be out front in holding Hizballah, and specifically Nasrallah, publicly accountable for dragging Lebanon through weeks of war. "That is where we can win the battle, to say: 'Mr. Nasrallah, you destroyed your country.'" Gemayel said that PM Siniora is on board with this strategy but that he could not be as outspoken in his criticism since he has to maintain the Cabinet's integrity and also does not want to exacerbate Sunni-Shi'a tensions. Gemayel also asked for continued USG support in spreading this message through the media and in helping to support the March 14 movement and to develop GOL institutions.

¶15. (C) Gemayel said the "coordinated strategy of

communication," mostly using the media, would also combat the Arab-Muslim perception, fostered by Hizballah propaganda, that the group's ability to hold out so long against the IDF was a "victory." Gemayel noted that Israel has so far mobilized only 25,000 troops and that it has clearly held back from a full-scale invasion, while he claimed Hizballah has lost 70 percent of its physical strength. The principal Hizballah strongholds - the South, Baalbek, and the southern suburbs - have all suffered severe damage. "It hasn't a

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victory. It was a disaster. We need to reverse the perception."

BUILDING RELATIONS WITH MODERATE SHI'A

¶6. (C) If this strategy were to succeed in weakening Hizballah, Gemayel said that moderate Shi'a parties, including Berri's Amal, need to be able to step in to fill the vacuum. Gemayel plans to work on splitting Berri away from Hizballah, and will recruit other Shi'a moderates to help him. Gemayel said he will meet later this week with Shi'a leaders to discuss alternatives to Hizballah. In addition, Kata'eb members met with Amal on August 7 to coordinate assistance to refugees, a mechanism which Gemayel hopes to continue and perhaps formalize into a political concord. He suggested this might even be an avenue for providing U.S. assistance to the South.

THE STATE OF MARONITE POLITICS

¶7. (C) Asked about the rumours that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is losing many of his supporters due to his pro-Hizballah stance, Gemayel lamented the fact that many of General Aoun's supporters are former Kata'eb party faithful who defected from the party during its days in the wilderness from 1989 through 2005, when Gemayel finally took back control of the party. Syria effectively controlled the party during that time, putting a stooge in charge whose sole task was to run the party into the ground, according to Gemayel. Gemayel is having trouble attracting people back into the Kata'eb fold. He admitted that the party's coffers are empty, making it difficult to get out and win back supporters. Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces, meanwhile, are both flush with cash, according to Gemayel.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) A member of the Christian grouping in the March 14 movement, Gemayel's desire to reach out to moderate Shi'a is a positive development and a creative bit of Lebanese confessional alliance-building. Once again, another influential figure, this time Amine Gemayel, is viewing Nabih Berri as a pivotal personality in Lebanese politics for any post-ceasefire period. If Gemayel and the other March 14 members can indeed cultivate Berri's Amal party and moderate Shi'a as an alternative to Hizballah, while also launching a media blitz against Hizballah's irresponsible adventurism and the destruction wrought by it, perhaps these parties can entice Lebanese Shi'a popular support away from Hizballah. No doubt Nabih Berri, who hates Hizballah perhaps more than any other Lebanese politician but relies on their electoral support in the South, would be happy to escape from the Hizballah fold. End Comment.

FELTMAN